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ABSTRACT

A class activity for young adult students of English as a second language uses simplified versions of Shakespeare's familiar dramatic plots to promote student participation and use of second language skills. The students are provided with a list of characters, a synopsis of the story, a room with floor space, and a time frame in which to recreate the story by ad-libbing lines in contemporary English. Most performances consume 10 to 15 minutes of on-stage time but require much more preparation, from one class period to several weeks. The performances may be videotaped to facilitate production and provide motivation and reward. The teacher should resist the temptation to act as director or correct errors after the curtain has risen. The approach has been found to overcome student shyness and produce real communication between students. An outline of procedures and a synopsis of "Romeo and Juliet" are provided. (MSE)

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SHAKESPEARE MADE SIMPLE

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All the world's a stage
And all the men and women merely players.
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts...

--William Shakespeare, "As You Like It" II, vii

Drama is taking a front row seat in ESL classrooms. In recent years there has been a proliferation of books, papers, and articles on how to incorporate drama into ESL classes. Use of drama now ranges from the most basic role play to actual performing troupes of ESL students.

As an ESL teacher with little more experience with drama than bit parts in high school plays, I was surprised to discover (1) how easy it can be to bring seemingly sophisticated drama into the classroom and (2) how through this medium intermediate and advanced students of English as a second language can use English for communication far beyond my or their own perception of their ability.

Why Shakespeare? Since Shakespeare is known around the world, most adult and young adult ESL students with academic backgrounds have read entire Shakespeare plays in translation. The themes are universal: love, hate, trust, fear, friendship, death, and so on. There are generally about a half-dozen central characters in a Shakespeare play, a manageable number for group work. The greatest asset of Shakespeare plays, however, lies in their action-filled plots. Take "Romeo and Juliet" as an example: boy meets girl, boy and girl marry, boy kills brother-in-law, boy flees, girl takes potion, boy returns...the rest is history.

How can ESL students speak 16th Century English for five long acts? I don't think they can. I couldn't either. That's where simplification comes in. The students are given four things: a list of the characters, a synopsis of the plot, a room with floor space, and a time frame in which to recreate the story by ad-libbing their own lines in contemporary English.

While most performances actually consume only 10-15 minutes of on-stage time, the amount of class time required to prepare a drama can vary greatly. The fastest student production I have witnessed was a tragi-comic rendition of "Romeo and Juliet," which was prepared and performed within one 50-minute class period. In contrast, another class took several weeks to discuss the theme, visit a theater, host a director as guest speaker, watch a videotape on Shakespeare's time, and select roles, rehearse, and perform a very serious "Hamlet." After that, they attended a professional production of the same play.

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The use of a video camera is not essential but can facilitate production and provide motivation and reward to student actors. With videotape, students can work scene-by-scene, capturing and preserving the spontaneity of each segment as it goes on stage for the first time. Afterwards students can watch themselves in action and, if they choose, authorize the release of the videotape for viewing by other students and teachers.

The teacher should resist at least two temptations in producing a simplified Shakespeare play--the temptation to sit in the director's chair and the temptation to correct students' errors after the curtain has risen. The best place for the teacher during rehearsal is standing by in the wings. During and after the performance are times for positive feedback. The proper place for the teacher then is in the audience leading the applause.

My students have revealed to me some of the subtler reasons for using drama in the classroom. Acting, like role-playing, gives students a chance to use language in situations of simulated oral communication. This broadens the scope of the classroom far beyond its four confining walls. Even better, organizing a drama requires students to interact with each other. The process of producing a play can become an opportunity for not just simulated but real communication among students.

Some say that to speak a second language effectively, a learner must assume a new role. If it is easy to take on the many roles which, according to Shakespeare, we play in our lives, then it should be easy to play a new role in a second-language environment. Unfortunately, for many language learners it is not easy. This is where drama can help break the ice. A play set in a strange time and place has an unreal quality and so is not threatening to the ego in the same way as real life. If a student takes the risk to act a part in a play and suffers no loss of ego, she or he may be similarly inclined to take such a risk by using a second language in the real world.

Shyer students in my classrooms invariably choose a walk-on part or the role of video camera operator, when a camera is available. However, once they have become involved in the production of the play, have familiarized themselves with the characters, and have walked across the imaginary stage of the classroom, they seem to develop confidence. They may change their minds and begin to take a more vocal role in both the play and other communicative tasks.

"This has never happened to me before," confided a shy Taiwanese by-stander-turned-actress who had never spoken out in any class in her life. She was amazed to discover that she could use a second language to accomplish her purposes. For this student, as for others, conquest of fear may mark a significant step toward effective functioning in a new language-speaking role.

How to Produce a Simplfied Shakespeare Play

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Write "Shakespeare" on the board.
B. Ask the students the following questions:
   1. When and where did Shakespeare live?
   2. Can you name any Shakespeare plays?
   3. What do you know about these plays?
   4. Would you like to role play the story of one of his plays?
   5. Which play would you like to do?
C. Measure the students' reaction.
   1. If the students are clearly not interested, abandon or postpone the activity.
   2. If the students are interested, together select one play. Then assign for homework the following short reports:
      a. The Life and Work of William Shakespeare
      b. The Cast of the Play
      c. The Plot of the Play
      d. The meaning of the following terms: the cast, the plot, the stage, an act, a scene, to enter, to exit, comedy, tragedy, history

II. PREPARATION

A. Look up "Shakespeare" in the World Book Encyclopedia.
B. Xerox the page which describes the play.
C. With scissors, cut the synopsis into as many scenes as there are changes of setting (see Appendix).
D. Paste the pieces of the synopsis on a sheet of paper, listing to the right of each scene the principal characters which appear (see Appendix).
E. Duplicate this handout, one copy per student.
F. Arrange to use a room with open floor space and, if possible, a video camera.
G. In class, listen to the oral reports. Respond to students' questions about Shakespeare and his plays.

III. REHEARSAL

A. List the principal characters on the board.
B. Give each student a copy of the handout.
C. Read the synopsis aloud as the students read along silently at their seats. Clarify vocabulary and meaning.
D. Ask students to choose parts and write their names on the board beside the character they will play. (In some cases one student will have to play more than one part, while in others two or more students will have to share the one part, dividing the scenes among themselves.)
E. Set a time limit for planning and rehearsing the play.
F. Ask students to begin.
G. Step to the back of the room to observe silently, offering encouragement and suggestions as needed.

IV. PERFORMANCE

A. If you have a video camera, record each scene as it is performed. Then play back the entire play without interruption while the students watch.
B. If you have no video camera, wait until the entire play is planned and rehearsed, scene by scene. Then sit back and watch the entire performance.

V. FOLLOW-UP

A. Offer praise and encouragement to the student actors. Do not correct students' language or criticize their performance unless the students ask you specifically to do so.
B. Ask students to discuss the questions below.
   1. What were some difficulties in planning and rehearsing?
   2. How did you feel about performing the play?
C. Offer one or more of the follow-up activities below.
   1. If you videotaped the play, schedule a private conference with each student to view the videotape and answer the student's questions about his or her use of verbal and nonverbal communication.
   2. Perform the play for another class.
   3. Learn more about Shakespeare's life and plays.
   4. Attend a real play by Shakespeare or any other playwright.
   5. Study and perform a play by another famous playwright.
   6. Take a tour of a theater.
   7. Write and perform an original play.

"ROMEO AND JULIET" by William Shakespeare

Romeo and Juliet, a tragedy based partly on *Romeus and Juliet*, a poem by the English author Arthur Brooke. Probably first performed in 1596. First published in 1597.

SCENE		CHARACTERS
i	The story deals with two teen-aged lovers in Verona, Italy, who are caught in a bitter feud between their families, the Montagues and the Capulets. Romeo, a Montague, and his friends crash a masked ball given by the Capulets. At the ball, Romeo meets Juliet, a Capulet, and they fall in love.	Romeo = Juliet = Dancers at ball =
ii	The next day, the couple are secretly married by Friar Laurence. Returning from the wedding, Romeo meets Juliet's cousin Tybalt, who tries to pick a fight with him. But Romeo refuses to fight his new relative. To defend the Montague honor, Romeo's friend Mercutio accepts Tybalt's challenge. As Romeo attempts to part the young men, Tybalt stabs Mercutio to death. In revenge, Romeo then fights and kills Tybalt. As a result of Tybalt's death, Romeo is exiled from Verona.	Romeo = Juliet = Friar Laurence = Tybalt = Mercutio =
iii	Juliet's father tries to force her to marry her cousin Paris, unaware that she is already married. To allow Juliet to escape from her father's demand, Friar Laurence gives Juliet a drug that puts her into a death-like sleep for 42 hours. The friar sends a messenger to the exiled Romeo to tell him of the drug, but the messenger is delayed.	Juliet's father = Juliet = Friar Laurence = Messenger =
iv	Romeo hears that Juliet is dead and hurries to the tomb where she has been placed. There, he takes poison and dies by Juliet's side. Juliet awakens to find her husband dead and stabs herself. The discovery of the dead lovers convinces the two families that they must end their feud.	Romeo = Juliet =

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